



The Defence Academy of the United Kingdom

Advanced Research and Assessment Group

Think Piece

The Current Revolution in the Nature of Conflict

Revolution or Evolution?

1. The nature of conflict changes constantly. But every so often the economic, social, political and technological pressures which force that change build up, and the suddenness, the pace, breadth and extent of change reach such a pitch that we can call it a 'revolution' rather than evolution.
2. Such revolutions in the nature of conflict I would identify as having occurred around 1648 (the peace of Westphalia and the coming-of-age of the nation-state), 1789 (The French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars) and 1914 (the industrialization of warfare). In my view, we are currently experiencing just such a revolution in the nature of conflict.
3. These revolutions have certain characteristics. Firstly, although we label these revolutions with a convenient date (eg. 9/11 2001), in fact, as Clausewitz reminds us, they take place over a long time and their real consequences only make sense through time.
4. Secondly, we think of them as 'military events'. But in fact the principal drivers tend to be economic, social or political rather than military-technical. They are not just "revolutions in the nature of battle".
5. Thirdly, in any revolution, only a fraction of things will change. The other fraction will stay the same. The problem for those of us who are living through this revolution, as with other revolutions, is that it is very difficult without the wisdom of hindsight to identify which things will change and which will stay the same.
6. As a result we are faced with a major problem. In a period of stability and slow evolution our greatest asset is our experience. But at times of revolution our experiences can be fatal baggage. We can no longer assume that, because something we did worked well in the past, it is likely to continue to do so in current circumstances. If we are to survive living in a revolution, we will need to make a correspondingly revolutionary shift in the way we think about both the risk and the response.

Causes of the Current Revolution

7. The main drivers of today's revolution in the nature of conflict, in my view, are: (a) the growing gap between rich and poor countries, (b) the uncontrollable proliferation of technology, and (c) the information explosion.
8. For an example of the growing gap between rich and poor countries, a map of the Mediterranean basin is a good place to start. Write on the map, for each of the countries to the north and south of the Mediterranean, the UN figures for the population, GDP and per capita income for 1990, today and projected to 2020. The trends are clear. The demographic implications alone are very dramatic. Another example: The combined wealth of the richest 250 people in the world is equal to the combined annual income of the poorest 2.5 billion people in the world. Above all, the poor are now aware of the disparities.
9. The proliferation of technology refers to all modern technology not just to the technology for weapons of mass destruction. Technological advantage in war and conflict is normally transient, and always depends not just on the available technology but also on our ability to learn how to use it and to incorporate it into our systems. In the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, the French had an effective machine gun. Whereas the Prussians did not. German Radar technology in 1939 was actually superior to the British. But in both cases the losers failed to integrate their technology into a system which would exploit it and as a result threw away their technological advantage. Note Al Qaeda's effective asymmetric use of technology, or the skill with which criminal gangs use modern communications technology. Not only can we sometimes not match the flexibility of these organisations and their ability to learn, but it can cost us £1000 to defeat what it costs them £1 to do.
10. The 'Information Explosion' has two aspects: IT and Media. Today's rapid developments in IT are well known. But with this presumed efficiency comes serious potential vulnerabilities. The ability to launch attacks on information systems depends not on wealth but on the cleverness of the attacker, and our opponents are just as clever as we are. As to media, I would argue that media (in all its forms) has become so out of control and all pervasive that it now constitutes an additional environment in which we must operate. To use a military example: a soldier planning a battle is taught always to give first consideration to the "ground", ie. the environment in which the battle will be fought - open countryside, rivers, towns, mountains, etc. "Ground" affects both sides – not necessarily equally. It cannot be changed very much, if at all. But it can be exploited by either side. To ignore the ground is unthinkable to a soldier. To fail to prepare the ground is unforgivable. To underestimate its influence is usually disastrous. Today, media is like a new environment in which we operate and which affects everything we do in policy making as in armed conflict. Yet many of us still do not usually give in the attention it deserves.
11. Of course the key to understanding the dynamics of today's revolution in the nature of conflict is to understand how all the above factors interact with each other and with the world around us. The spread of information and technology gives weapons, and the ability to use them effectively over a long period of time, to those with a grievance to redress.

12. Defining Security Today

During the cold war, the term 'national security' was synonymous with 'defence'. The more tanks and planes a country had, the safer it felt. Today the terms are no longer synonymous. For example, Israel is militarily stronger today than ever before. Israel could defeat convincingly a simultaneous military attack by all its Arab neighbours combined. Yet today the Israeli people feel more insecure than they have felt for half a century.

Today we need to redefine what 'security' is and what we need to do to achieve it. Likewise we need to redefine terms which depend on security, such as 'deterrence'. How we deter today's threats will not be the same as how we deterred the threats during the cold war.

13. A lot of very good work has been done to identify strategic trends, new risks and challenges and potential threats. From these, I would conclude that the **major source of problems for us lies in bad governance**. By this I mean (a) the incompetence of governments in weak or failing states which cannot cope with their internal pressures or resolve local and regional disputes, and (b) our own inability to change our national and international systems of governance to cope with the new challenges. This includes not just the competence of national Government, but the effectiveness of corporate governance, the efficiency of non-governmental organisations etc, and how we use and control the non governmental bodies that today play an ever increasing role in security.
14. The products of poor governance – organisational inefficiency, corruption, obscure and ambiguous domestic legislation, outdated international law - themselves help generate bad policing, insecure borders, inappropriately structured armed forces, etc. These in turn facilitate the manifestations of the threat or create the actual problem, viz: organised crime, ethnic conflict, religious extremism, terrorism and, of course, actual war.

Responding to the Challenge

15. To respond effectively to the security challenge we face during the current 'revolution', we need to:
 - a) change our mental approaches to the problem – concepts;
 - b) change the tools with which we respond – capabilities.The question is, how?
16. Firstly, we need a better understanding of our society today: how it has developed and how these new issues interact with it. For example, the efficiency of electronic banking, combined with the efficiency of 'just-in-time-delivery' processes, creates the real susceptibility to catastrophic disruption that was first noticed in the fuel drivers protest 6 years ago. The volatility of the now-global stock exchange and our economic susceptibility to disruption (eg. by terrorism elsewhere on the globe) is another good example.
17. Secondly, we need a better understanding of the nature of the real issues that now face us. This is not easy. The issues are complex, and the UK, like most countries,

has limited resources to study the new issues, and the implications take time to sink in. If we do not understand the real threat, and base our defence and security planning solely on our own perception of our vulnerabilities, not only could we be very surprised by an opponent's different perception (and exploitation) of our weaknesses, but we will also be prey to wasting effort and money on unnecessary defences - worthless, but very profitable to those lobbying for them.

18. When tackling today's security problems, qualities such as 'vigour', 'sincerity', determination, and 'firmly held convictions' are only a good basis on which to proceed if they are based on a real deep understanding. Otherwise they are dangerous attributes. We will only be able to get a deep understanding of the new issues if we get our whole 'thinking community' (officials, academics, technologists, social scientists, economists, etc) thinking and working together, focussed on the new issues, each contributing their bit to the overall understanding. It will not be quick. It will take us time, money, effort and humility. Above all, it requires that we see ourselves through the eyes of others (eg, the Arab Street).
19. Most important to appreciate is the declining role of government in the international arena. Just as we are increasingly seeing non-state actors as generating serious security threats, so also we now see tasks being done by NGOs and private military companies in conflict zones and in the post conflict recovery phase that, in 1990, would have been entirely the prerogative of the state and its armed forces. This trend is likely to increase (if only because these firms and NGOs have a better business model than does the state). But we have not yet developed the tools of governance to handle this new partnership adequately.
20. At home, our societies are losing their trust in government at the same time as they are losing traditions, beliefs, family values, roots. For the first time in human history it is common for people in western societies to live alone in a house or flat. As they lose their traditional psychological support mechanisms (family, religion, ideals, ritual and tradition) people become more easily influenced by external information (and a media which gives respectability to uninformed opinion). With no-one to share ideas with, people are more easily given to over-responding and intemperate reaction. Society is losing its resilience – its ability to keep its balance, not to overreact, to recover after a shock, to withstand hardships.
21. To compound this situation, there is today an almost total lack of media correspondents and editor who really understand defence and security issues. The widespread popularity of violent video games, films, etc. means that young people no longer understand what pain and death really mean. It is not difficult to imagine that there might be serious implications for the public's response to defence policy issues, or in the event of a military setback or defeat. Long term, these social developments certainly impact on recruiting and retention in the Armed Forces.

Changing the Mechanisms of Response

22. This has two components, (a) changing how we do things
(b) changing the actual institutions with which we respond

The most important aspect of changing how we do things refers to the way we respond to the new threats (risks, challenges, etc). We can no longer divide threats to security neatly into internal and external threats. We can no longer guarantee national security by military means. (armies plus diplomacy and spies)

For a military intervention to be successful we now depend on the ability of other departments and agencies to make their successful contribution. If The Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) cannot deliver the support of the international community (via UN, NATO, EU or other), and if The Department for International Development (DfID) cannot deliver adequate post conflict reconstruction and capacity building (including controlling and directing NGOs and private contractors), then the Armed Forces' success in battle (eg. in Iraq) will be for nought. MOD's contribution to joined up governance becomes vital.

Moreover, if FCO, DfID and other departments, and big private companies such as BP, cannot deliver serious improvements in social conditions and economic prosperity, for example in North Africa and the Middle East then, in 10 years time, our Armed Forces might well be having to fight to ensure our energy supplies.

23. Similarly, in domestic security, MOD now has a large vested interest in ensuring that the Home Office, Police, Security Service, the Department of Trade & Industry (DTI), Health, and Transport Department, etc. all make their essential contribution to security. Domestic support for military policy, recruiting, the acceptance of military aid to the civil power in mainland UK, all will be affected. What our troops do today in Basra has an immediate impact on the attitude (eg. towards the government and its policies) of a large proportion of the population of Bradford.

The Challenge

24. The principle task over the next 2-3 years will be to develop MOD's collaboration with other Government departments in researching and tackling new security, resilience and development issues. Most important are the relationships with the Treasury, FCO and DfID; the Treasury because it will need to be convinced of the fitness of the MOD's business model for its changing role in the security equation. FCO and DfID because they will have to play the main role in 'winning the peace' and ensuring that British forces do not need to stay indefinitely after a conflict, or do not need to go there in the first place.
25. A second element that must be considered is the government's relationship to the corporate world. The corporate world has a great to deal offer Whitehall in helping to deal with new security issues of all sorts, and the business community would benefit greatly from more input from government, eg. advising on what countries offer the best prospects for security and stability for long term investments, etc.
26. The third element of "how we do things" relates to technology. During most of the cold war, defence research led national technological research. This is no longer the case in most areas. Furthermore, technological developments are outstripping our capacity

to learn how to exploit them and how to incorporate them effectively into our systems. For this to happen, educational systems and force structures need to be more flexible. This affects all aspects of force generation – procurement, manning, training & education, structuring, tactics, organisation and equipment. We do not want our potential enemies to ‘beat us to the drop’ when it comes to using new technology effectively – an issue shared across government and out to the NGOs and Civil Society.

27. Fourthly conflict is a ‘hot house’ for forcing change. But that change – in societies, institutions, armed forces etc, occurs in direct proportion to the impact the conflict has on each side. As a society we have not yet understood that the current conflict in which we are engaged is vital for us. It does not yet cause us enough pain for us to learn and change. But our opponents do see this conflict as vital and they are learning quicker than we are.
28. We therefore face the crucial task of ensuring that our Armed Forces are appropriately structured, trained and led to meet the new challenges that will confront us. That includes ensuring their support by the population at home and their protection under international law abroad.
29. Deployed and employed to fulfil new, post 9/11 style operations, our forces will need a very high degree of cultural sensitivity, and the ability to operate at short notice in parts of the world where we may have little experience or infrastructure support. They will need to work smoothly at tactical level with locals, non governmental organisations and private companies. They will need to be able to operate within a variety of ad hoc coalitions, and cope with the fact that coalition partners may not be competent to operate in the difficult circumstances pertaining. Above all, individual soldiers will have to understand that a tactical success can also be a strategic disaster. The soldier on the scene may know the situation better than the senior commanders, and may have to act contrary to their orders.
30. This brings us back to our starting point. We are in the middle of a revolution in the nature of conflict, the impact of which reaches from top to bottom of our defence, development & security structures, home and away. Preserving what is good in our system and changing what needs to change is our second great challenge. Our first challenge is identifying which is which.

C N Donnelly
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The Defence Academy
of the United Kingdom

Advanced Research and Assessment Group

Senior Fellow Chris Donnelly heads the Defence Academy's Advanced Research and Assessment Group (ARAG). It harnesses expertise across the whole spectrum of defence and security subjects for the Ministry of Defence and other government departments.

Engaging practitioner and assessment communities worldwide, ARAG supplies policymakers and educators with focused and timely analysis of current and future national and international security issues.

ARAG conducts its assessment process through thematic 'research clusters' of specialists from a wide range of backgrounds. Products are delivered to customers to agreed deadlines in ways specifically suited to their needs; via:

- Facilitated scenario driven events
- Policy development exercises
- Crisis management exercises
- Seminars and workshops
- Individual and group briefings
- Policy reports and submissions
- Web calendar and information portal

The work of ARAG is organized around 'research clusters'. A Research Cluster is an administrative mechanism which provides a framework to bring together experts from all sources to address specific issues. The clusters help to establish networks of individuals with valuable information, expertise or experience to perform analysis of key issues and to contribute to an understanding of problem areas.

Drawing on these networks established under a research cluster enables Cluster Directors to organize brainstormings, commission studies, and set up educational activities, which tackle key issues and problems for MOD and other government departments. The cluster research and assessment process equally provides for the harvesting of ideas, expertise and experience to benefit the education process within the colleges of the Defence Academy.

Clusters are established to reflect the express needs and priorities of the MOD, of other government departments with security responsibilities, and of the colleges of the Defence Academy. The composition of clusters will be reviewed every six months, and amended as necessary to reflect changing needs and requirements.



The Islamic World

- Theology and Islamic Diversity
- Regional Perspectives
- Islam in UK
- Economics and Law
- Education and Culture
- Militant Islam

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Defence and Security Relations

- Defence and Security Sector Reform Assessment
- Force Capability
- Requirements of Coalition Building
- Generating Reserves
- Developing International Structures – UN, NATO, ESDP, Partnership For Peace; Mediterranean Dialogue; Initiatives for the Broader Middle East
- Defence Diplomacy
- Information and Analysis Techniques
- Non-Military Security Agencies

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Terrorism and Asymmetric Campaigns

- International Terrorism
- Capacity Building for Defence against Terrorism and Asymmetric Threats
- Determining Roots of Terrorism
- Anticipating how Terrorist Threats Evolve and New Security Threats
- New Technological Approaches to Identifying / Disrupting / Interdicting the Terrorist Target
- Identifying New Approaches to countering the Terrorist Threat
- Alternative Analysis of Intelligence

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Risk, Economics and Resilience to Crises

- Enabling leadership and co-ordination for resilience to crises
- Charting the risks of events and the needs of decision takers in dynamic networks
- Generating coherent and sustainable policy and capability options
- The Essence of Societal Resilience
 - Human Security in network societies
 - Critical infrastructure, services and open standards
 - Organisational learning capacity
- New Security Issues
 - Regulatory Impact Assessment: Legalism and exceptions
 - Environmental Security
 - Energy security
 - Demography and Migration
- The Evolving Relationship between the Corporate World and Security
- Science, Innovation, Technology and Policy
 - Balance of Investment in R&D networks
 - Evolutionary acquisition of capabilities
 - (Anti-) Market forces in defence, development and security industries
 - The role of education in delivering decisive capabilities

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Media and Democratic Participation

- Establishing the Principles and Practice of Democratic Participation in the Evolving World System
 - How democratic participation is changing and why
- Determining the changing Role of Mass Media and Interactive Multi - media and its Impact on New Security Circumstances
- Media and Democratic Participation in Post Conflict Reconstruction and in Countries at Risk of Instability
- Sustaining Evidence Based Policy making in the New Security Environment
- Dealing with Corruption, Poverty, Greed and Grievance
- Local models for Civil Society; Civil Service and Civil Military Relationships
- Culture, Religion and Ethnicity
- Legality and Legitimacy in the New Security Environment

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“The mission given to the Defence Academy is ‘to deliver high quality education and training, research and advice in order to sustain and enhance operational capability and advance the defence and security interests of the United Kingdom’. Looking ahead, I see the greatest potential for development in the immediate future being in the area of advanced research and assessment...”

Lieutenant General Sir John Kiszely KCB MC
Director of the Defence Academy

Defence Academy of the United Kingdom

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“We find ourselves today in the middle of a revolutionary change in the nature of conflict. Our most urgent challenge is to adapt our traditional mechanisms of analysis and response to meet the new security threats which now face us. We need a new partnership between government and non-governmental institutions, and a refocusing of our national effort.”



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